



FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

July 11, 2017 (Kampala, Uganda) - More than 40 civil society representatives from Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya gathered at the Sheraton Kampala Hotel for a two-day strategic workshop on “Protecting Civic Space in East Africa.” The workshop addressed urgent concerns voiced by civil society in the region, in the midst of a global trend of increased restrictions on the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression. Participants discussed relevant laws, policies and practices in their respective countries. They also agreed on national and regional advocacy priorities, notably the immediate implementation of the Public Benefit Organisations (PBO) Act, 2013 in Kenya; repeal of the Cybercrimes Act, 2015 and other draconian laws in Tanzania; and confirmation of the nominated civil society representatives to Uganda’s new Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Board.

The civil society organisations represented work on human rights, democratic development, transparency, internet security, media, women’s empowerment, natural resource governance, legal aid and other issues of public interest. They were hosted by Chapter Four Uganda, a leading civil liberties and human rights organisation, and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), a US-based organisation that has provided technical expertise on laws that govern civil society in over 100 countries worldwide and more than 20 in Africa.

Addressing the group, the Acting Executive Director of the Uganda National Bureau for NGOs Stephen Okello declared, “This is a new era for NGOs in Uganda.” He was referring to the promulgation of the NGO Policy of 2010, the NGO Act of 2016 and the NGO Regulations of 2017 -- a process which took the government ten years to finalize. He called for continued dialogue between civil society and government to reduce mistrust between the sectors as the new regulatory framework is put in place at the national, district and sub-county levels.

He added, “Civil society is not going anywhere and we must work together for the good and development of the country,” emphasizing his goal of creating an enabling environment for civil society in Uganda to thrive. He also encouraged civil society leaders to think deeply about how to create a more sustainable funding model for the sector, including carrying out income-generating activities in line with the new NGO Act, since “donor priorities may shift, independent of the needs of civil society and its beneficiaries.”

During the workshop, participants discussed coalition-building for national legislative advocacy campaigns, media engagement and public outreach, grassroots organizing with marginalized populations, and constructive engagement with local and national government officials to protect the civic space, among other key topics. Colleagues from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania shared their experiences and best practices in these areas, as well as ongoing challenges they face in their work. The contexts differ in the three neighboring countries, as Uganda is setting up a new regulatory framework while Kenya is in the midst of election

preparations and Tanzanians face increasing threats to their freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. Still, the participants identified many common issues to be addressed through regional “communities of practice” such as self-regulation, civic space monitoring and research, and civil society-government relations.

The workshop concluded with participants agreeing upon national action plans that identified priority issues to be addressed in the next twelve months with commitments by organisations to follow up on specific action items. Afterward, the participants were joined by development partners for a luncheon where they shared the fruits of the workshop discussions. The donors in attendance re-affirmed their support saying, “We continue to stand with civil society in Uganda and throughout the region. Protecting civic space remains among our very top priorities.”

For more information, please contact Emerson Sykes, Legal Advisor-Africa at ICNL at esykes@icnl.org.